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Nica's peace bid a sham: State Dept.

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WASHINGTON — The Reagan administration has concluded that Nicaragua's latest "peace offensive" is little more than an attempt to convince Congress to vote against sending more covert aid to the Nicaraguan "freedom fighters" later this month.

The analysis has led the administration to continue its no-holds-barred campaign to put military pressure on the Sandinista regime to renounce its Soviet and Cuban sponsors and make a series of Democratic reforms.

Senior White House and State Dept. officials told The Post last night that the conclusion was reached after Secretary of State George Shultz met with Nicaraguan leader Daniel Ortega over the weekend.

Shultz reported that the meeting produced no new ideas or progress on how to resolve the festering dispute over the consolidation of another Marxist-Leninist state in Central America.

The administration believes that Ortega's

latest conciliatory moves — which include meeting a delegation of U.S. clergymen, including Archbishop O'Connor, and vowing to send home 100 Cuban advisers — are nothing more than a ruse to convince Congress later this month to vote to extend the ban on covert CIA aid to the Nicaraguan rebels.

"Ortega is offering nothing more than a plan to stall for time and sway a few votes in Congress to his side," said a senior U.S. official.

One senior official said last night that "it is more important than ever" to convince Congress to resume the aid to the Nicaraguan rebels.

Officials have said that the administration believes that the so-called "contras" have between six months and a year to make major progress on the battlefield before the Sandinista regime becomes "too powerful militarily" and consolidates its hold on the Nicaraguan government.

The administration has decided to push for continuation of covert funding for the Nicara-

guan rebels despite ongoing opposition from congressional Republicans and Democrats.

But in a series of private discussions with Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman David Durenberger (R-Minn.) and Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), the administration has developed a "fall back" plan which would call for official recognition of the contras as a legitimate political group.

This would allow the U.S. to send funding to the contras while at the same time preventing breaking of diplomatic relations with Nicaragua and closing its embassy — which is serving as a valuable intelligence gathering post.

On Saturday members of the three main anti-Sandinista groups formed a political alliance with key political dissidents and issued a major paper that calls for a direct dialogue with the rebel leaders.

The move was clearly designed to give the CIA-backed guerrillas political credibility.